

BLACK AND TAN REALITIES: CHICANOS IN THE BORDERLANDS OF THE HIP-HOP NATION

Amanda Martinez-Morrison
Sonoma State University

Drawing from ethnographic observation, this analysis explores the dynamic, oftentimes surprising ways race matters within hip-hop by focusing on U.S. Latinos—specifically, Latino rappers in the San Francisco Bay Area. The extensive participation of Latinos in hip-hop culture regionally as well as globally suggests that hip-hop can no longer be understood (if it ever could) narrowly as “a black thing” where blackness is equated solely with African Americans in the U.S. At the same time, I argue that the experiences of U.S. Latinos in hip-hop cannot be understood in ethnic isolation, but rather must be framed relationally in terms of Latinos’ engagements with African Americans and black cultural forms. Of particular interest here are Mexican Americans, who comprise nearly seventy percent of all Latinos in the Bay Area, in California, and the U.S. more broadly. I examine the ways Bay Area Chicanos simultaneously assert their own distinctive ethnic identity through participation in the hip-hop arts while at the same time recognizing commonality and building community—however tenuous—with other racial and ethnic groups, particularly African Americans.

Focusing on the complex, layered identities of U.S. Latino hip-hoppers provides a useful lens through which to understand the dynamic, oftentimes surprising ways race matters within the hip-hop formation. The extensive participation of Latinos in hip-hop attests to the fact that it can no longer be understood (if it ever could) narrowly as “a black thing” where blackness is equated solely with African Americans in the U.S. At the same time, the experiences of U.S. Latinos in hip-hop cannot be understood in ethnic isolation, but rather must be framed

relationally in terms of Latinos' engagements with African Americans and black cultural forms. I take this notion of "relational" cultural analysis from Luis Alvarez's insights on Chicano youth subcultures, which begin from a key historical premise:

There was a demographic explosion in the 1930s and 1940s of Mexican, Latina/o, Filipina/o, Japanese, and African-American communities in metropolitan areas as a result of the wartime economic boom and related Great Migration, immigration from Asia, Mexico, and Puerto Rico, and the growth of first-generation U.S.-born children. One important by-product was close-knit spatial relations among diverse populations in cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, Houston, Chicago, and New York. Sharing residential areas, frequenting the same night spots, and, in some places, attending integrated high schools led to a myriad of contacts among urbanites of color. Although geographic proximity did not always lead to social interaction, many young people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds did socialize, share fashion, and create musical styles together. One result was that Chicano youth, as well as their Asian American and African American counterparts, constructed identities that were relational or, in other words, at least partially based upon their interactions with other racialized youth and constitutive of their multi-valent cultural world. ("From Zoot Suits to Hip-Hop" 57)

Such interactions remain the norm in the San Francisco Bay Area, where I conducted multi-sited fieldwork at youth-serving community centers, concerts, and informal street settings from 2004 to 2006. These cross-racial interactions have in fact intensified due to new influxes of Mexican as well as Central American immigrants into historically African-American enclaves in cities such as Oakland and San Francisco. In the following analysis, I examine the ways in which Bay Area Latinos simultaneously assert their own distinctive ethnic identity through participation in the hip-hop arts while at the same time recognizing commonality and building community—however tenuous—with other racial and ethnic groups, particularly African Americans. A primary line of inquiry I explore revolves around the possibilities and challenges of forging cross-racial connections using a popular art form often equated with essentialized blackness. I focus especially on the bicultural realities of Chicanos who comprise the majority of urban Latino youth in the Bay Area. I not only emphasize how they are at once extraordinarily adept

at “code switching” between English and Spanish languages and Mexican and American traditions, but also how they are enormously creative cultural hybridizers, generating novel hip-hop fusions that blend Spanglish with Black English and urban street slang.

Latino hip-hoppers in the U.S. provide an especially rich illustration of the complex racial dynamics of both the hip-hop nation and of the United States because they occupy an interstitial racial location that falls in between (and thus confounds) the black-white binary logic of U.S. racial discourse. Much like African Americans and Asian Americans, U.S. Latinos have undeniably been racialized throughout U.S. history, as frequent targets of bigotry, scapegoating, and various “moral panics” (Alvarez 2009; Gómez 2008; Katzew & Deans-Smith 2009; Molina 2006; Ramírez 2009). Nevertheless, according to the U.S. Census, the label “Latino” or “Hispanic” (the latter being the preferred institutional term) constitutes not a racial grouping, but rather an ethnic category that can include members of any of the five officially recognized races: white, African American, American Indian, Asian, and Pacific Islander.¹ Notwithstanding the minority of Afro-Latinos, Amerindians, and Asian-Latinos who identify clearly with one of the aforementioned state-recognized racial groups, the majority of U.S. Latinos do not fit easily into any one Census-defined racial category. Rather, they trace their mixed lineage to the violent history of encounter between indigenous Americans and European imperialists during the Spanish colonial era. Whereas in Mexico and numerous other Latin American countries, this mixed or “mestizo” heritage forms the basis of the dominant national identity, U.S. Latinos find themselves in a racially ambiguous, contradictory netherworld as, on the one hand, a people without race (according to state-sponsored demography) and, on the other, an intensely racialized group subject to brutal xenophobic attack (at the level of lived experience) (Akers Chacón & Davis 2006; Chavez 2008; Oboler 1995; O’Brien 2008; Rodríguez 2000).

Numerous scholars have taken this *ni aquí ni allá* (“neither here nor there”) positioning as a starting point from which to develop theoretical insights into the unique political, social, and cultural perspectives of Latinos. Of particular interest here are the works of Chicano cultural critics who use the U.S.-Mexico border as literal and figurative inspiration for developing “thirdspace” conceptualizations of identity and culture (Bhabha 1994). Gloria Anzaldúa describes these in-between places as the “borderlands,” which she characterizes as

simultaneously conflict-laden and culturally generative. In the opening paragraph of her famous work, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), Anzaldúa compares the U.S.-Mexico border to:

una herida abierta [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture ... A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* [the crossed, cross-bred] live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the “normal.” (3)

For Anzaldúa this concept of borderlands can be understood expansively to include not just the geographical region in and around Mexico’s northern boundary and the southernmost parts of the U.S., but any space—physical, cultural, psychological, political—where misfits and the marginal assemble, where opposing elements collide to create something newly hybridized.

Chicano cultural theorist, José David Saldívar, develops a similar paradigm of hybridity in his notion of the “*transfrontera* contact zone,” which he links to postmodern cultural forms (bricolage, pastiche, *rasquachismo*) and global flows (labor migration, media circulation, transnational capital): “[W]hereas modernism’s border patrol once kept the barbarians out and safeguarded the culture within, there is now only liminal ground, which may prove fertile for some and slimy for others” (21). Saldívar’s notion of the “*transfrontera* contact zone” draws heavily from an older anthropological concept of the limen, or liminality, described by symbolic anthropologist, Victor Turner, as the spaces falling “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (qtd. in Saldívar 98). Following Turner, Saldívar describes the limen not just as a threshold or “interstitial stage” to be passed through, but rather a permanent and “lived socially symbolic space” (99). It is the difference between older paradigms of immigration wherein the individual goes through an acculturation process and emerges fully assimilated, as a citizen of a new nation, versus thirdspace conceptualizations of culture that acknowledge the multilayered complexities of identity and experience—particularly for immigrants and those who dwell near borders of any kind. According to Turner,

“liminality should be looked upon not only as a transition between states but as a state in itself, for there exist individuals, groups, or social categories for which the ‘liminal’ moment turns into a permanent condition” (qtd. in Saldívar 98).

The following case study frames hip-hop as a *transfrontera* contact zone for Bay Area Latinos where the social experiences of people racially marked as “brown” converge with those of black populations, creating culturally conjunctural urban identities. Of particular interest here are Chicanos, who comprise nearly seventy percent of all Latinos in the Bay Area, in California, and the U.S. more broadly and have long been key contributors to a dynamic, hybrid urban expressive culture in major California cities such as San Francisco, Oakland, Los Angeles, San Diego, San Jose, and Sacramento. Such contributions manifest most strikingly in the historical movements of the *pachuco*, “cholo” lowriders, and Chicano *movimiento* radicals, who helped author a sense of California subcultural cool in the post-WWII era.² In each case, cultural historians point to significant ways in which brown and black influences overlap: in *pachucos* and African-American hipsters wearing zoot suits and dancing to swing and doo-wop music (Alvarez 2007; Alvarez 2009; Garcia 1998; Lipsitz 1990; Macías 2008; Loza 1993); in the shared car-culture obsessions and soul-music enthusiasms of *cholos*, black inner-city youth, and gangster rappers (Cross 1993; Johnson 2002; Kelly 1993; Lipsitz 1990; Loza 1993; McCarthy 2004; Rodríguez 2003); and in the inspiration Chicano Movement artists and activists drew from Black Arts and Black Power figures (Hernandez 2002; Johnson 2002; McCarthy 2004).

Contemporary Latino youth carry on those syncretic traditions, adapting them in creative ways to suit the sensibilities of the hip-hop generation. As has been well documented, U.S. Latinos have been key contributors to hip-hop culture since its South Bronx beginnings in the 1970s, when it was primarily Puerto Rican and Nuyorican youth authoring street-dance styles that came to be known as “b-boying” or “breaking” (del Barco 1996; Flores 1994; Flores 1996; Flores 2000). The ongoing role of East Coast Caribbean-descent hip-hoppers continues to receive scholarly attention (Rivera 2003; Rivera, Marshall, & Pacini Hernandez 2009), but the influence of Mexican Americans in hip-hop remains underexplored. Although a growing number of scholarly works on Mexican-American rap has begun to emerge (Delgado 1998; McFarland 2002; McFarland 2008; Pérez-Torres 2006; Rodríguez 2003), these articles rarely acknowledge

Bay Area artists and instead focus on Southern California, where the “low and slow” style of Chicano lowriders in Los Angeles helped set the tone for the laid-back West Coast aesthetics of the 1990s G-funk era.³

The Bay Area also contains an extremely active network of Chicano and Latino hip-hop artists hailing from the barrios of San Francisco’s Mission District and Oakland’s Fruitvale, the Latino-majority city of San Jose, in addition to the blue-collar towns and suburbs spread throughout the region as well as the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys.⁴ I now turn my attention to a significant node in this local network, an independent music label known as Thizz Latin-Black N Brown Entertainment.

Hispanics Getting Hyphy: The Case of Thizz Latin

I first became aware of the Thizz Latin-Black N Brown Entertainment company in 2007 through a series of promotional fliers emblazoned with group photos of African-American and Latino rappers “mean mugging” (i.e., a scowling, gazing confrontationally) for the camera. The images revealed telltale signs these rappers aligned themselves with the Bay Area’s “hyphy movement,” an exuberant yet short-lived hip-hop style associated primarily with urban black youth, whose trendsetting activities were at the time attracting attention from mainstream media outlets—everything from MTV to NPR to *USA Today*.⁵ The term “hyphy”—explained alternately as an abbreviation of “hyperactive” or a condensation of the hip-hop slang terms “hype” and “fly”—came to signify a whole range of “carnavalesque” youth-subcultural practices: everything from psychedelics-fueled partying to car-stunt “sideshows” to spastic dancing described in local vernacular as “going dumb” or “riding the yellow bus” (i.e., the gesticulations of someone requiring Special Education or in some way impaired). Many credit slain Vallejo, CA rapper, Mac Dre, with inspiring the hyphy regional style with his jester-like persona, rave-influenced fashion, and flamboyant dancing.

Regional slang also proved constitutive of the hyphy movement,⁶ and one such term, “thizz”—which refers to the synthetic drug ecstasy or, more broadly, to an ecstatic, ludic, riotous state—appeared in bold print across the Black N Brown fliers. Also distinctive were the t-shaped hand signals flashed by the rappers in the flier photos—a gesture reminiscent of a

referee's "time out." Although I presumptuously mistook this for some sort of gang sign, I later learned their hands as well as facial grimaces signaled mischief rather than menace: the "t" signaled allegiance to the "thizz nation," a phrase nearly synonymous with the hyphy movement, while the facial expression—a contortion of the nose, brow, and upper lip known as the "thizz face"—is a signature somatic gesture in hyphy culture. Meant to mimic a look of disgust, as when Mac Dre explains in the lyrics to his song "Thizzle Dance," "First, I do like this / Put a look on my face like I smelled some piss," the thizz face is supposed to be comical, calling attention to what Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) calls the bodily "lower strata" in a humorous, "carnavalesque," pleasurable way.

These fliers signaled extensive creative collaboration between Latinos and African Americans in the hyphy movement. I learned they were marketing materials for the independent record label Thizz Latin, an imprint of Mac Dre's Thizz Entertainment group. Thizz Latin represented the merger of Thizz Entertainment with the Black N Brown independent music group founded by Julio "Gold Toes" Sanchez, a Chicano MC and hip-hop impresario hell-bent on highlighting the diversity of the hyphy movement. A close associate of Mac Dre and Thizz Entertainment CEO, Kilo Curt, Sanchez aims to dispel the notion that the hyphy movement, and Bay Area hip-hop more generally, is solely a "black thing." To the Mission District native, who grew up traversing contiguous black, Latino, white, and Asian turfs in San Francisco's Bayview, Excelsior, Diamond Heights, and Visitacion Valley neighborhoods, respectively, the city is practically synonymous with diversity. "I'm a San Franciscan to the heart," Sanchez enthusiastically opined to me during our first meeting. "I'm a melting pot within my mind and in my soul" (Sanchez, Personal Interview).

For our interview, Sanchez suggested we have lunch in the Mission District at a Peruvian restaurant called Rincón Peruano—a family-run hole-in-the-wall joint at some remove from the hipster-gentrification nexus of Valencia Street. I had never heard of the place, despite having lived in the Mission for four years during the late-1990's dotcom heyday. Sanchez, however, had lived there most of his life, and knew the proprietors personally. In a neighborhood where hundreds of Mexican restaurants cover the culinary landscape, Sanchez's choice of Rincón Peruano signified the existence of a pan-Latin identity—his as well as his neighborhood's,

whose Mexican-dominant population and vibrant Chicano-arts tradition often overshadow the rich cultural contributions of other Latin-American national-origin groups. It was indicative to me of the ways in which Chicano-ness or *Chicanismo* is intermittently important to my interlocutors, who only occasionally emphasize being Mexican American as more significant than other social ascriptions such as Latino or just plain American. All this suggests the emergence of a distinctive post-nationalist identity among hip-hop generation Chicanos, particularly aspiring entertainers, who typically favor the more diffuse identity marker of Latino because, A) they view it as potentially more useful in marketing themselves since it suggests a larger consumer base who can relate to them (Dávila 16); and B) it simply better reflects their lived experience in ethnically mixed enclaves.

As for “Gold Toes” Sanchez and I, our South American feast was not to be. On that hot Mission afternoon, I arrived to find the restaurant closed. Soon after, Sanchez rolled up in his cream-colored Cadillac, trunk beats blazing. As he lowered his tinted window and invited me to jump in, he suggested—again, rather surprisingly, given the surfeit of Mexican eateries nearby—that we head up to a Chinese restaurant in Diamond Heights, a neighborhood where he also spent some growing-up years. Offering further proof of Sanchez’s “melting pot heart and soul,” when we walked into the restaurant, the Asian immigrant owners greeted him by first name. To some, Sanchez could be imposing, with his brawny build, shaved head, and fiery demeanor. To the restaurant’s proprietors, he’s just a neighborhood kid.

As he mowed down Asian barbecue chicken wings, Sanchez related to me how he was using his community-bridging skills and street hustle to build a wide audience for his label’s pan-Latin roster of hardcore rappers,⁷ including Mr. Kee, Tito B, Freddy Chingaz, and Louie Loc, who are of Cuban, Mexican, Salvadoran, and Nicaraguan descent, respectively. Sanchez knows full well, however, that “when you talk about hyphy, you think about a lot of people that are brothers,” i.e., African Americans, many of whom he counts as friends and associates from shared stomping grounds in San Francisco’s Outer Mission, Fillmore, and Bayview-Hunter’s Point districts. But Sanchez is on a mission to show how “us Latinos, man, we’ve been hyphy.” As evidence, he cites the 1998 compilation album he produced, *17 Reasons*, featuring black MCs San Quinn, Messy Marv, Mac Dre, B-Legit, and a host of lesser-known Latino hardcore

rappers. It was the first release on Sanchez's fledgling Black N Brown independent record label, and it eventually became an underground hit, selling over 60,000 copies. From there, Sanchez and Mac Dre's partnership grew, resulting in a series of hardcore-rap compilations focusing on Latino and African-American talent. By 2006, Sanchez realized he had a sizeable stable of Latino rappers needing to be developed, and so he founded Thizz Latin. In the coming years, he has plans to launch a similar venture called Thizz Asian to promote some of the Filipino rap talent he tells me is bubbling in the Bay Area.

In between sips of Tsing Tao beer, Sanchez proclaimed to me that, beyond San Francisco's Latino enclaves, Thizz Latin rappers can move any crowd, regardless of demographics. In the African-American 'hoods of Hunter's Point, "we can have it rockin'"; among upscale Anglos on Union Street, "we can have it crackin' off the hook"; "[w]e could go to Chinatown, and they're gonna love us." A few weeks earlier, I had in fact seen one of Thizz Latin's premier artists, Chicano MC Jimmy Roses, rock the racially mixed crowd when he opened "Super Hyphy 18" at the Santa Rosa Fairgrounds up in the Sonoma County wine-country exurbs. Well after Roses' set, however, a fight broke out in the crowd that drew a dramatic response from riot-gear-equipped local police. The altercation solidified the association of hyphy and the "thizz nation" with criminal and unruly behavior among local authorities and businesspeople, marking the beginning of the end for the Super Hyphy concert series and a serious contraction of live-performance opportunities for Thizz Latin artists.

Parallel to rap music's generally bad rap within "polite society," an undeniable stigma attached itself to the hyphy subculture during the years it flourished—roughly 2004 to 2007—because of its association with dangerous behaviors such as fighting and gunplay, "thizzing" and drug use, illegal car stunts, as well as its linkage with criminal elements. Some of these associations are warranted. Although the circumstances of Mac Dre's murder remain unsolved, it is widely known that he founded his music label, known in the late 1990s as Romp Records, with friends from the infamous Romper Room robbery gang whose exploits were featured in season three of BET's popular *American Gangster* documentary series. At the same time, hyphy style extended so far beyond Dre's nefarious inner circle as to capture, at least momentarily, the zeitgeist of an entire regional youth culture. Typically, it amounted to nothing more than a

generally mischievous attitude and a penchant for trunk-rattling beats, fluorescent-hued fashion, and raucous dancing. Nevertheless, hyphy formed what queer-theory scholar Michael Warner characterizes as a “stigmatized counterpublic”—stigmatized to the level that nearly every black, Latino, Asian and white kid who happened to like local rap and follow street trends was perceived as somehow troubled or menacing. Warner reminds us that “[t]he discourse that constitutes [a counterpublic] is not merely a different or alternative idiom but one that in other contexts would be regarded with hostility or with a sense of indecorousness” (119). He adds, “[H]ierarchy or stigma is the assumed background of practice. One enters at one’s own risk.” (121)

For Thizz Latin artist, Jimmy Roses, the whole notion of hyphy and thizz got twisted to mean purely drug-addled or aggressive behavior when it is actually more about getting loose, mixing it up, and dropping your gangster guard a bit. While in some ways convergent with gangster-rap expressive styles, hyphy nevertheless forgoes gangster obsessions with masculine coolness and self-mastery, favoring playful performance over power moves, wild abandonment over cold-blooded composure, and insouciant expression over tough-guy swagger. According to Roses,

That’s what was good about what Mac Dre did with the hyphy movement—he brought the whole feel-good element ... that made it easier for more ethnic backgrounds to participate. Just the whole idea of it. Hyphy, “thizz nation”—it got misconstrued. A lot of people said “oh thizz means drugs, this and that.” The bottom line for thizz is it means feel good. “Thizz nation” is just like saying the “feel-good nation,” you know what I’m sayin’? (Roses, Personal Interview)

Roses characterizes the affect of “feeling good” with a pleasure-seeking, inhibition-loosening state that enables momentary liberation from the rigid “code of the streets” within which street-oriented males like himself are bound. For the so-called players, hustlers, and thugs who live by it, the code requires numerous constraints and continual acts of boundary maintenance: one must maintain a cool masculine comportment at all times, earning respect among allies and cultivating fear among enemies through demonstrations of personal mastery and cold-blooded force, if necessary. The code is in some ways practical in that it provides a system for

safely and successfully navigating fraught, turf-divided 'hood terrain, where fierce competition over scant resources pits not only black against brown but black against black, brown against brown, neighbor against neighbor, and block against block. According to Roses, hyphy gives those brought up within such divisions a break from all that boundary work. He contends this is exactly why the hyphy movement opened up a space for African Americans and Latinos to get together using hip-hop as a unifying platform even though it is a cultural formation traditionally marked as black. Speaking specifically of Thizz Latin's multiracial project, Roses asserts:

We constantly strive to bring some sort of unity to the Bay Area because it's so diverse ... So what we do is we make it acceptable for everybody to be who they are. Because we can all make good music. I've had a lot of people meet me and go, "man, I thought you were black," you know? And I'm like, "no, it's me." It does trip people out. Then on the same token, I think it inspired a lot of people. (Personal Interview)

Implicit in Roses' desire to make "being who you are" acceptable is relaxing the fixed-identity stranglehold placed upon various ethnoracial groups around notions of authenticity. Cultural anthropologist, John L. Jackson, characterizes displays of racial authenticity as performances whose competencies require external validation. He invokes sociologist Erving Goffman's famous notion of social "scripts" to describe such performances, yet he emphasizes the inevitability and, indeed, the cultural generativity of racial performances that break down or fail. "The scripts we read from are never enough. Or rather, they are always too much—overly long and convoluted. They strain our actorly capacities for memorization. There are far too many pages, lines, cues, characters and stage directions to shore up a racial performance once and for all" (Jackson 18). Out of such failures Jackson proposes an alternative model of "racial sincerity," derived from "authenticity's excess," its "inassimilable remainder" (13); paraphrasing Ralph Ellison, he calls it the "something-elseness" of race (15). Whereas "[a]uthenticity presupposes a relation between subjects (who authenticate) and objects (dumb, mute, and inorganic) that are interpreted and analyzed from the outside, because they cannot ... speak for themselves" (15), sincerity is based upon subject-subject interaction or intersubjectivity. Within the sincerity paradigm, Jackson counters Gayatri Spivak's famous assertion: the subaltern can

indeed speak, since “[q]uestions of sincerity imply social interlocutors who presume one another’s humanity, interiority, and subjectivity” (Jackson 15).

It is these kinds of intersubjective racial dialogues that make the hip-hop lifeworlds of Roses, Sanchez, and their Thizz Latin peers possible. While dominant hip-hop discourses remain preoccupied with strident notions of authenticity and “keeping it real,” what I observed locally were numerous pockets of interracial exchange that transgressed the fixities often assumed by the cultural markers “black,” “Chicano,” “Latino,” and even “hip-hop” itself. Sanchez, with his “melting pot mind and soul,” represents the kind of relational ethnoracial identity so common in the Bay Area, as does Roses, a fifth-generation Mexican American who sheepishly admitted to me he speaks only English, not Spanish. Falling short of what some would consider an “authentic” *mexicano* or even Chicano, he identifies in some ways as stereotypically “all-American,” evinced by his suggestion we do our interview over lunch at the San Francisco meat-and-potatoes mainstay Tommy’s Joynt—a place better known for celebrity sightings of the rock band Metallica than any ethnic associations. Looking every bit the hip-hop-generation Latino, Roses arrived wearing the same style of throwback sports jersey and Girbaud jeans popular among African-American young adults. During our conversation that day, he related how it was really his parents who identified with the “cholo” and “chola” aesthetic. They spent most of their youths hanging out in the Mission District barrio during the neighborhood’s lowrider cruising heyday in the 1960s and 1970s (although his mother actually hailed from Hunter’s Point, a historically black neighborhood that over the past thirty years has begun to see its Latino population swell). Roses himself is from South San Francisco, a separate suburban municipality located at the northernmost tip of the South Bay Peninsula. Although “South City” boasts several major biotech firms and is steadily being enveloped by Silicon Valley wealth, when Roses was growing up, it was a blue-collar industrial area where many minority families settled when housing prices in San Francisco proper became too steep. As Roses describes it,

One thing about South City, it’s gotta be one of the smallest, most diverse cities. It’s super diverse. I mean, I went to school with Tongans, Samoans, Fijians, Filipinos, blacks, you know? Not a whole lot of Caucasians, actually. Yet, when you say, “Okay there’s not

a lot of Caucasians,” either you think, okay, it’s completely Latin or completely black. But that was not the case. I mean, it was really mixed. (Personal Interview)

Unusually high levels of ethnic and racial diversity characterize numerous Bay Area cities and suburbs. The region is on the vanguard of broader national economic and demographic shifts that are changing widely held racialized preconceptions of what constitutes an inner city, a suburb, a barrio, and a ghetto. Most strikingly, immigrants from Latin America are increasingly settling in atypical areas: historically black low-income urban enclaves offer some of the only affordable housing for Latino families in large cities, while low-wage manufacturing and food-processing work draws new immigrants to outlying suburban, exurban, and rural areas not only in the American West, but also in the Midwest and Deep South (Tobar 2005). Undoubtedly de facto segregation still persists in the U.S.—in some cases with a vengeance (Massey & Denton 1993)—but it often plays out just as Jimmy Roses described it: with whites in circumscribed areas of affluence and “people of color” (i.e., everybody else) relegated to less-desirable low-income containment zones. In the case of the Bay Area, “everybody else” (i.e., Latinos, African Americans, Asians, American Indians, and Pacific Islanders) represents well over half the population.⁸

The region’s diversity is tied to numerous historical factors, one being that its shipbuilding industries made the Bay Area a destination for thousands of Southern blacks during World War II. At that same time, the U.S. Bracero Program recruited large numbers of Mexican laborers to work on nearby farms, canneries, and railroads. In addition to these now-established third-, fourth-, and fifth-generation Chicanos, the Latino population continues to swell as subsequent waves of Mexican and Central American immigrants arrive daily seeking service-sector work and manual-labor jobs in agriculture and construction. Finally, and just as importantly, the Bay Area’s location on the Pacific Rim ensures the continuing presence of longstanding Asian populations, some of whom are new immigrants, and some of whom trace their families back to the Gold Rush era.

The confluence of such factors gave rise to the types of mixed-race towns, neighborhoods, and suburbs of the kind in which Jimmy Roses grew up. His experience differs somewhat from that of his parents, who in the 1960s and 1970s looked to the Mission District

barrio as a safe-haven community in a racially atomized city. “At that time it was real segregated, so you could only hang out in certain areas,” Roses explains (Personal Interview). His spatial and racial identity is more mobile and migratory, traversing city and suburb while unsettling the fixity of barrio and *movimiento* Chicanismo through his adoption of the hip-hop lifestyle and its attendant pan-ethnic ambiguity.

If anything, the factor that binds hardcore MCs like those associated with Thizz Entertainment is not race but social class. In contrast to the realm of “backpacker” hip-hop—whose largely college-going audiences value socially conscious lyricism and old-school, non-gangster aesthetics—the thuggier street-rap terrain traveled by Roses, Sanchez, and most hyphy artists contains its own authenticating system organized primarily around one’s experience in “the ‘hood” and “the streets.” As I stated previously, the popularity of the hyphy movement served to expand what is considered acceptable conduct in the heavily codified street sphere—namely around performances of race as well as gender and sexuality, since the exuberant gestures, deportments, and dance styles associated with hyphy in many ways break with conventions of hard-boiled masculine coolness. But shared class locations remain important. In order to be a legitimate artist in the hardcore-rap subgenre (out of which hyphy emerged), one must maintain street credentials in the form of battle wounds, underworld associates, or at the very least, a verifiable ‘hood address. Clearly “street” as well as “‘hood” serve as metonyms for low-income, high-crime social spaces in which few economic opportunities exist outside of involvement in informal economies—activities locals refer to in using the ambiguous phrase “hustling.” Particularly for young men, involvement in the black-market drug trade is so ubiquitous it is practically a rite of passage.

In the Bay Area as well as nationally, blacks disproportionately occupy the poorest Census tracts that constitute America’s “‘hoods” and “ghettos,” as are young African-American men disproportionately affected by the social violence associated with such high levels of poverty. Nevertheless, in the multiracial low-income neighborhoods of Bay Area cities such as Oakland, San Francisco, and San Jose, as well as in economically strapped blue-collar suburbs like Richmond, Hayward, and Vallejo, young people from Latino, Asian, and Pacific Island immigrant families also suffer the negative impact of neoliberalism, with its two-pronged attack

on the vulnerable in the form of industrial job loss and social welfare cutbacks. As a result, many of the young Latinos, Asians, and Polynesians (particularly members of the region's sizeable Southeast Asian, Samoan, and Tongan communities) find themselves caught up in the same dire circumstances as do local African-American youths.

Growing up among these multiethnic peers in working-class South San Francisco, Jimmy Roses became oriented with all of that street mentality stuff. "It's inflicted a lot of hardships on my family." Roses has "been through it," running the streets and even spending a little time locked up in prison, which he describes as far more segregated than the Bay Area streets. "When you go to the pen, northerners, like, Norteños and cats that are from Northern California, hang out with blacks ... And then you have your whites and your Sureños together. What that does is it breeds a lot of hatred [among Latinos] when they come back out, and it just tears the streets up" (Personal Interview). Those dynamics create strained *intra*-ethnic as well as *interracial* relations that in no way resemble a multicultural utopia (lest you thought that was what I was describing).

Part of the Thizz Latin project is to build broad audiences not only by bridging black-brown divides but also by counteracting intra-ethnic animosities through Latino street alliances. In pursuing this agenda, Roses eschews the *cholo* look; firstly, because he does not identify with it as closely as his parents did, who embraced barrio sartorial style as a symbol of Brown Pride; secondly, because the look is more associated today with Sureños, a Los Angeles-based mega-gang whose members more closely maintain the *cholo* style and *caló* slang patterns of older generations (whereas Norteños are said to look more "Americanized" and "hip-hop"). In a nod toward post-nationalist Chicano solidarity, Roses consciously avoids overt gangster imagery in his lyrics and CD artwork, appearing on the cover of his 2006 self-titled debut looking less like a *cholo* and more like a bad-ass "rydah" in a leather jacket, motorcycle gloves, and low-rider Locs sunglasses. In his self-presentation, he chooses to represent more for the racially polymorphous hip-hop nation than for any pure or primordial Aztlán homeland.

Everybody knows I ain't white, you understand what I'm saying? ... I don't have to be a *cholo* to be a Mexican. I don't want to be part of that stereotype. There ain't nothing wrong with *cholos*. That's all of my bloodline. That's all of my past time. I'm proud of

that heritage and that culture. But me personally, and my children and their children's children, I think that, you know, like you had your hippies and, I mean, you move on. You start to change. We don't have to rap like we're struggling in the barrio. (Personal Interview)

For later-generation, post-*movimiento* working-class Chicanos like Roses and Sanchez, notions of acculturation must be redrawn to reflect their social and geographic proximity to other groups, particularly African Americans. More so than white middle-class hegemonic norms, it is hip-hop—and the predominately black-vernacular styles associated with it—that worked as key socializing agents in their lives. As a striking and, some would argue, disturbing display of the ease with which many hip-hop-generation Chicanos have incorporated black idioms into their own expressive repertoires, Sanchez and numerous other Mexican-American hip-hoppers I encountered regularly use the “n-word”—or, more specifically, the truncated Black-English pronunciation of “N-I-G-G-A”—to refer to friends and associates. Sanchez explains, “Basically, I grew up with Africanos, all brothers. My DVD says, you know, Gold Toes is a nigga, you know what I’m saying? He’s a nigga from the root of his bones...” (Personal Interview). When I asked him whether it is acceptable to use the epithet in the presence of his African-American homies, he became somewhat self-conscious, straining to substantiate a controversial but, for him, extremely taken-for-granted behavior. His discomfort seemed less rooted in the issue of language-use in front of blacks—among whom he claimed it was “cool,” reminding me he was one of the only Mexican Americans to ever work in the gang-riddled, predominantly black neighborhood of Hunter’s Point doing high-school violence prevention. His squeamishness centered more on a concern that he had offended me, someone who he rightly perceived as middle-class and lacking in any street credibility whatsoever. At that point in our conversation, he did not even know I was Chicana; rather, he pegged me as Italian American. Essentially, I represented to him those white middle-class hegemonic norms he experienced at some remove. Stammering uncharacteristically in response to my question, Sanchez related, “You know, you know when to be—but really, that’s how I talk. But I know, like, in certain areas, certain settings, I try my best to talk properly. I’m not the best at it, but I try to ... really, I should do that all the time, but it’s like I just, I’m just doing what we doin’.”

Over and over during my research, I heard Mexican Americans use the n-word as a familiar term. I also heard young African Americans bestow it like a title upon their Chicano friends. Such was the case when I interviewed the Trunk Boiz, an Oakland-based hardcore rap crew who gained internet notoriety when their video for the song, “Scraper Bike,” became one of the twenty most-watched YouTube clips of 2007. Ten of the eleven group members are African American. One, an MC from Richmond who goes by the name 2Deep, is of mixed Mexican and Pacific Island heritage. Although 2Deep was not present at the interview, his “boiz” represented for him:

Arty Bo: He ain’t a ordinary Latino.

Alexander tha Grate: Yeah, he not though! (chuckles)

Amanda: Is that supposing that Latinos are “ordinarily” subpar rappers, then?

Arty Bo: No, no, no.

Alexander tha Grate: Naw, I’m just saying, like, just his demeanor.

B-Janky: That’s a nigga.

Alexander tha Grate: His mannerisms.

Amanda: Oh, I gotcha.

Luv Doc: He’s black.

Arty Bo: Yeah, he’s a brother. (Trunk Boiz, Personal Interview)

This dialogue echoes hip-hop scholar Robin D.G. Kelley’s observation that n-word usages in gangsta rap are often class-based rather than exclusively racial. It is frequently employed “to describe a condition rather than skin color or culture. Above all, nigga speaks to a collective identity shaped by class consciousness, the character of inner-city space, police repression, poverty, and the constant threat of intraracial violence. Part of NWA’s ‘Niggaz4Life,’ for instance, uses ‘Nigga’ almost as a synonym for ‘oppressed’” (137). Kelley contends African-American gangster rappers commonly use the n-word:

to distinguish urban black working-class males from the black bourgeoisie and African Americans in positions of institutional authority. Their point is simple: the experiences of young black men in the inner city are not universal to all black people, and, in fact, they recognize that some African Americans play a role in perpetuating their oppression.

To be a “real nigga” is to be a product of the ghetto. By linking their identity to the “hood” instead of simply skin color, gangsta rappers implicitly acknowledge the limitations of racial politics... (137)

In the inverse, I am tentatively suggesting that the Trunk Boiz’s deployment of the n-word implicitly acknowledges the possibilities of post-Civil Rights, hip-hop-generation class politics, even though their use of that kind of charged language typically makes old-guard and middle-class activists uncomfortable (as evidenced by the symbolic “funeral” for the n-word organized in 2007 by the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]). But beyond Robin Kelley’s framing of n-word usage in purely Marxian terms—as a sign of shared class interests—the Trunk Boiz insert superstructural or cultural elements into the equation when they invoke 2Deep’s “mannerisms” and “demeanor.” They suggest that, because of 2Deep’s common social location and experiences, but also his affect and deportment, he in a sense *becomes black*. Their conversation perfectly illustrates the fluidity and performativity of race—of the way it is culturally constructed rather than determined by birthright or phenotype.

While constructivist claims about race have become the theoretical norm in academia, cultural, ethnic, and area studies often shy away from subjects in which racial identities slide, ooze, and fragment. Youth-culture historian, Luis Alvarez, concurs in his disciplinary intervention in *Ethnic Studies*:

As fields that have historically focused on a single group or community, one common assumption in Chicano and Ethnic Studies is that their objects of study are bounded by ethnic or racial markers. Too often, the fields have been structured in a kind of silo or vertical model of organization, with each field left to produce knowledge on a particular race or ethnic group without much consideration to how different groups engage one another. Moreover, when inter-ethnic experiences have been the focus of research, more often than not, the concentration is on the relationship between one “minority” group and a generalized “white mainstream.” Such an approach can be limiting because it risks ignoring the rich history of conflict and cooperation between different racialized groups, implicitly frames race and ethnic relations within an artificial analytic binary (e.g. black-white or brown-white), overlooks whiteness as its own racialized or fractured

identity, and glosses over the class, gender, sexual, regional, and generational differences within different racialized groups. (“From Zoot Suits to Hip-Hop” 56)

Perhaps there is fear that emphasizing blurred racial boundaries will detract from the political efficacy of identity politics and the ways in which, as social anthropologist, Kamala Visweswaran, stresses, “races are cultural/historical formations that may also entail positive affirmations of social identity and acts of survival” (74). Perhaps there is also fear that overemphasizing the performativity of race will lead whites to conclude they can avoid the thorny issue of skin privilege and class inequality and simply migrate to seemingly more glamorous, “cool,” or “authentic” social locations, much like the bourgeois white bohemians who move to the Mission District barrio, enjoying its low-rent chic while displacing longtime Latino residents. My intent is not to overstate the racial transgressions and relocations of my consultants but, rather, to begin to frame hip-hop as a conjunctural, relational cultural formation—one that frequently opens up space for social actors to forge novel identities and alliances that exceed racial determinacies. The Trunk Boiz and the Thizz Latin artists’ ability to cross racial boundaries and cultural borders suggests the formation of new imaginaries within hip-hop, which is beginning to look less like a fenced-in nation and more like a *transfrontera* borderland.

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Notes

¹ The 2010 Census expanded Asian and Pacific Islander categories to include numerous regional/national-origin categories: "Asian Indian," "Chinese," "Filipino," "Japanese," "Korean," "Vietnamese," "Native Hawaiian," "Guamanian or Chamorro," "Samoan," "Other Asian," and "Other Pacific Islander." A mixed-race category became available in 2000 for the first time in the U.S. Census' centuries-long history.

² The *pachuco* youth subculture emerged in the 1940s in the growing Mexican-American working-class barrios of the U.S. West, especially in urban California and Texas. It was distinctive for its culturally hybrid zoot-suit fashion (appropriated from Harlem Renaissance "hipster" sartorial style) and *caló* dialect, which blends Spanish slang with American English vernacular, especially African-American "jive" talk. "Cholos" inherited numerous stylistic markers from their *pachuco* predecessors, including the use of *caló* slang, bridging elements of Chicano street culture into the 1970s and '80s, when lowrider cars and hip-hop culture emerged. The heyday of the Chicano Movement occurred during the 1960s and 1970s and is part of civil-rights struggle as well as ethnic-pride emphasis of the 1970s. Its leaders were primarily young Mexican-American activists who organized numerous protests and campaigns—most notably, the East Los Angeles high-school "blowouts" or walkouts protesting unequal education in 1968, out of which emerged the revolutionary Chicano organization known as the Brown Berets; the 1969

Denver Chicano Youth Liberation Conference; the 1970 Chicano Moratorium anti-Vietnam War protest at Los Angeles; and the labor-organizing activities of the United Farmworkers Union.

³ The majority of Chicano rap's best-known artists have, indeed, emerged from Southern California: most notably, Kid Frost and Cypress Hill as well as newer notables Lil' Rob, Jae-P, and Down a.k.a. Kilo. Other notable L.A. Chicano rap acts include Delinquent Habits, Lighter Shade of Brown, Proper Dos, A.L.T., Brownside, Psycho Realm, 2Mex, Tolteka, Mr. Shadow, Knightowl, Dyablo, and Slush the Villain.

⁴ The closest the Bay Area ever came to producing a "crossover" Chicano rap act is Vallejo's Funky Aztecs, who most famously collaborated with Tupac Shakur on two tracks, including a hip-hop reworking of War's lowrider anthem, "Slipping into Darkness."

⁵ MTV produced two segments on the hyphy movement. In 2004, MTV News ran the feature "Hyphy: Crunk, Northern California Style." In 2006, MTV News produced an episode of its "My Block" series on "The Bay," hosted by MTV personality and Oakland native Sway Calloway. In April of 2006, an article about hyphy written by Steve Jones appeared in *USA Today*. In 2007, NPR's "Fresh Air" aired a segment on hyphy by Ken Tucker, the series' pop music critic.

⁶ Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Mac Dre and other local rap luminaries developed an extensive slang lexicon that by the mid 2000s entered the vocabularies of Bay Area youth across the social spectrum. Other notable neologists include E-40, widely considered the most prolific slang-smith in the history of hip-hop, and Keak the Sneak, who is credited with coining the phrase "hyphy."

⁷ "Hardcore" is a descriptor sometimes used interchangeably with "gangster," "thug," and "street" rap to describe a realm of hip-hop culture rooted in "the 'hood," a metonym for any low-income, high-crime ghettoized urban neighborhood. Hardcore rap frequently includes content that emphasizes the more nefarious aspects of 'hood life, including involvement in black markets and street violence. A polysemic term, "hardcore" connotes overlapping meanings in hip-hop contexts: 1) the experience of hardship, harsh or "hard" realities, difficult life experiences, economic privations and obstacles; 2) being "hard" or "hardened" to those life circumstances; being a survivor who has acquired the necessary personal armor to withstand and even thrive in such conditions; and 3) being "hard" or virile, suggesting a rigid and phallogocentric masculinity that dominates this realm, to the extent that all other gender and sexual identities are rendered highly marginal.

⁸ According to the 2000 United States Census Bureau, the racial makeup of the nine-county Bay Area is forty-six percent white non-Hispanic, twenty-three percent Asian American, one percent Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, seven percent black, one percent Native American, and twenty-two percent Hispanic (Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005-2007 American Community Survey).